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ABSTRACT

Despite the uniqueness of each individual's experience, approximate communication is possible in the margin of overlap between the speaker/writer's experience and that of the hearer/reader. This vague phrase, "margin of overlap," can be clarified and given an empirical base through application of the measure of vagueness developed in Labov's study, "The Boundaries of Words and Their Meanings." Labov shows that for words that refer to simple objects, the non-simple range of ascription can be described with great accuracy through study of actual speakers' uses of a word. A modal description of an object can be constructed that is linked to a list of key elements affecting ascriptions of the word. For technical discussions, this strict definition (modal with variables) gives an empirical base on which to ground discussion. Such strict definitions could be immediately useful in discussing terms like "art" and "novel," where Labov's model for strict definitions could be used to construct empirically valid, verifiable bases for such contested concepts. From these strict definitions it should be possible to construct loose, general definitions that meet speaker intuitions and incorporate all important variables, as is the case with words referring to simple objects. Such intuitively valid, empirically verifiable definitions could ground studies in margin of overlap, thereby grounding empirical rhetoric. (Author/DS)

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Variable Meanings in Empirical Rhetoric

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Abstract

Kenneth Burke argues in Counter-Statement that despite the uniqueness of each individual's experience, approximate communication is possible in the margin of overlap between the speaker/writer's experience and the hearer/reader's. This vague phrase, margin of overlap, can be clarified and given an empirical base through application of the measure of vagueness devekoped in Labov's study, the boundaries of words and their meanings.

Labov shows that for words which refer to simple objects, the non-simple range of ascriptions can be described with great accuracy through study of actual speaker s uses of the word. With his test word cup, for instance, Labov can construct a modal description of the object linked to a list of key elements affecting ascriptions of the word, key elements which constitute especially the class of functions and materials of construction. For technical discussions, this strict definition (modal with variables) gives an empirical base on which to ground discussion. For general definitions, Labov concludes, such strict definition too severely restricts the range of ascriptions. Vaguer definitions, as appear in dictionaries, are actually more useful, incorporating most of the variables at issue, though empirical study can insure that all variables are included. This combination of strict and general definitions implies a predictive power over word use and a monitor of language change.

Strict definitions can be immediately useful in discussion of what John Kekes in a recent issue of Philosophy and Rhetoric has called Essentially Contested Concepts. Terms like art and the novel constitute, for Kekes real issues leading to rational solutions. Labov's model for strict definitions could construct empirically valid, verifiable bases for such rational resolutions .

From these strict definitions, it should be possible to construct loose, general definitions which meet speaker intuitions and incorporate all important variables Such intuitively valid, empirically verifiable definitions could ground studies in margin of overlap, grounding empirical rhetoric.

Historicist, evolutionist theories of communication argue persuasively that works from the past cannot carry the same meaning today as they did when first written. Cultural change and language change define and shape one another, directing the possibilities for succesful communication. In so far as the values of the present day are different from those of yesterday, communication across time will be incomplete. The grave difficulty with the historicist argument is that, as Kenneth Burke (1931:78) points out, such arguments threaten to deny the possibility of any communication. Just as there exists a gulf between communities of speakers in different times, the intrinsic separateness of individuals threatens communication within the present situation. Since your experience and mine can never be wholly identical, no absolute guarantor of mutual understanding can direct communication.

But we do in fact communicate. Burke argues that as we are all human and alive, we share, at least, the bond of biological similarity and beyond that, of course, we actually share similarities of culture, education, values and language. Because we always share these fundamental similarities, approximate communication is always possible. Though absolute identity of meanings is unlikely, approximate communication exists in the margin of overlap between the writer/speaker's experience and the reader/hearer's experience. The problem for an empirical rhetoric is to translate the notion of margin of overlap into some framework of language

use which accounts for the ranges within which communication operates.

William Labov (1973) presents such a translation, focussing on denotations of referring words as grounds for a sociolinguistic semantics. We can avoid philosophical difficulties with the meaning of meaning by dealing only with reference, but we cannot deal with the whole range of issues in communication. Intersections of experiences are the sources for those overlaps in discourse which account for communication and denotations have a significant share in those intersections of experience. Empirical studies in the uses of referring words can, at least, begin the process of developing a relationship between studies in sociolinguistics and rhetoric.

Labov finds his way into the study of reference through Max Black's (1949) construction of consistency profiles for word uses. Black begins with our intuitive sense that word meanings are vague, translating that feeling of vagueness into a measure of the consistency with which speakers use words to denote objects. The project here is not concerned to delineate the enormous variety of objects we classify with a single word but to account for the inherent indeterminacy which is apparent in the uses of words. There is, for instance, no simple, absolute boundary between objects we call trees and those we call shrubs. Each speaker in a community has a vague sense of the height at which a shrub metamorphoses into a tree and for the community as a whole, communication

succeeds within a range of tacit agreement over that vaguely understood height. Three elements together give Black a measure of this approximate communication: a community of speakers, a situation in which speakers try to use a word to denote objects in a series, and the consistency with which the words actually do denote objects. The statistical result, a consistency profile, describes a boundary between words which reflects interactions among various elements in the situation, such as the introduction of new objects and people or the removal of old ones. For Labov, the consistency profile becomes a measure of vagueness which meets a serious issue in linguistic theory.

Though linguistics is intrinsically concerned with language meaning, linguists have been surprisingly uneasy in studies of words. In fact, several attempts have been made to avoid the slipperiness of the word word by the invention of technical terms like lexeme and formative. Labov argues that word meanings slip away from linguists because variation in meaning is inherent in word use. A categorical approach, based on distinctive features, describing essential elements, is bound to fall short. The introduction into a situation of new people, new objects, new functions and new relations will always affect uses of words. As communities change, word uses change, so that any study of words which does not focus on actual use of words will encounter confusions, while any study which does focus on actual uses will inevitably encounter variation in those uses.

Black translates our sense of vagueness into consistency of use; Labov translates consistency to variability in boundaries between words. That second translation allows Labov to construct a new kind of definition, intuitively valid, empirically verifiable definitions which account simultaneously for the range of agreement and the sense of vagueness in word use. In Labov's view, word use is grounded in the characteristic human act of classification, but the public nature of language demands flexibility in that classifying process. Word use must be inherently vague to encompass new situations, changing relationships so that linguists must expect to find word use exhibiting characteristics of both categorization and variation. Studies of language competence cannot rely on data from introspection precisely because the inherent variability which is essential to a community of speakers cannot be captured intuitively by one speaker.

The first NWAVE conference at Georgetown in 1972 centered on extensions and revisions of Labov's (1969) argument for inherent variability of copula deletion in Black English. Though several papers from that conference have relevance for rhetorical theory, the most immediately useful is Labov's study of meaning, which argues for inherent variability in word meanings and constructs a measure of the boundaries of that variability.

Labov's experiment, focussing on the sample word cup, was remarkably simple. He showed drawings of cuplike

objects to speakers and asked them to label the drawings. On a single page, subjects saw a numbered series of drawings, varying down the page by depth and across the page by width. Some of the drawings showed handles, some did not; some were round, some nearly square. In some cases, subjects were told what materials the objects were made of, sometimes what substances they contained. Where the objects became deeper the word cup was replaced by vase; when width expanded, the objects became bowls. Removing the handles from deep cups made them into vases sooner than with handles; filling wide cups with soup made them bowls sooner than when they were empty.

Labov uses a forced choice test, requiring individual subjects to make a choice even in the most vague cases, demanding a decision about the boundaries between words. Though Labov allowed waffling with adjectives, as in long cup or fat cup, the head word cup always counted as decisive. Though for any one speaker's intuitive introspection, this test would be merely time consuming, over a wide range of speakers, consistency emerges, variable boundaries between words become clear and subject to precise description.

Speaker responses generate a series of consistency profiles which Labov displays in a series of graphs. Though a clear understanding of Labov's detailed graphing procedures would be essential to actual research, such detailed information would be out of place in a survey such as this. Rhetorical theory needs to take up the judgments about word

uses which Labov makes, turning them to the discovery of implications beyond semantics. The consistency profiles which emerge from Labov's study indicate intrinsic variability in word use boundaries. Categorical definitions of words cannot account for interactions of shape, functions, and materials in directing uses of words. On the basis of this judgment, Labov attempts to redefine cup.

Empirical study of consistency profiles of ascriptions of the word cup indicate a kind of definition closely resembling those in dictionaries. Labov argues that vague dictionary definitions reflect the lexicographer's accurate intuition that word meanings are inherently variable, adjusting continually to changes in culture and language. What Labov can add, besides moral support for lexicography, is a strict description of the range of objects which virtually everyone would call cups and a list of variable elements which assures that all significant items and their interactions are accounted for. There is an invariant core of objects which are nearly always called cups, reflecting the categorical process of naming. Various elements, materials, functions, and shapes, interact to cause the size of that invariant core to expand, reflecting the vagueness of boundaries among objects we call cups, bowls, and vases. Thus Labov's model definition accounts for both permanence and change in meaning, giving a relatively stable base along with a system of interacting variables.

Within an experimentally described range, virtually

all speakers will understand the use of the word cup to denote a class of objects. With the addition of variables, the invariant core will expand, but not to the same extent or in reaction to the same variables for any two speakers. Some speakers reserve the word mug for use with coffee and soup so that their use of the word cup will be wider than for speakers who use mug for a certain shape, regardless of contents. With a large sample of words defined on Labov's model, it becomes possible to consider the notion of margin of overlap in communication as a function of variability in word use.

If a writer or speaker describes an object well within the invariant core of cuplike objects, but ascribes some other term, the audience will probably be lost. At the level of use of a simple word like cup, odd uses often arise with non-native speakers, and such odd use is, in itself, one signal of non-native status. Conversely, when a poet uses cup in a way which speakers find creative, it should be possible to account precisely for that creativity as the introduction of one or more new variables, say the addition of rose petals to the materials of construction for cups. Once Labov's definitions are constructed, they take on predictive power.

Since Labov's definitions are empirically grounded, they implicitly argue that speakers should nearly always use the same term for words within the invariant core. Once we have Labov's definitions, we gain predictive power

over word uses, a power with direct consequences to the study of hierarchies of value and language change. Variable elements in Labov's definitions can be ranked by order of impact, as for instance, with cups the presence or absence of handles has more impact on ascriptions of the word than any other variable. The study of change can be measured as shifts in the range of the invariant core plotted against time.

The construction of hierarchies of variables as hierarchies of values can give us a direct test of Burke's margin of overlap, suggesting perhaps that connotations are an aspect of the variable range of denotations. Wherever predictions fail, wherever a speaker uses a word outside expectations, it should be possible to identify precisely the variable element or elements which direct the response. Approximate communication can occur because we agree on the range of the invariant core, while individual experience will determine different uses of variables, different specific ascriptions of words near boundaries. If I take the handles off your green loving cup, most speakers will report seeing a vase, but you will demand to know what I've done to your loving cup, since for you the handles have less value than they would for anyone else. Since handles have significant impact on the use of the word cup, we can predict how speakers will react in a given situation. Failures of the predictions, for a single speaker, indicate some element shifting rank within the hierarchy of variables. Your loving cup is your trophy regardless of my vandalism to its handles.

For most speakers, removing handles changes the name of the object, approximate communication succeeds because we generally agree, tacitly, on the importance of handles to cups. The margin of overlap between us can be understood as the intersection of your valuations of variables and my valuations of those variables.

When, on the other hand, predictions about ascriptions within the invariant core fail for a wide range of speakers, we have a measure of language change. Kate Chopin's 1899 novel, The Awakening, uses the word car in several instances to denote passenger vehicles drawn by horses. Introduction to literature courses are bound to encounter difficulties here since most, if not all, members of the class use the word car exclusively to denote automobiles. Webster's points out that car is an ancient word, probably Celtic, which denoted any wheeled vehicle. According to the OED, car had become chiefly poetic by the sixteenth century, returning to general use in the nineteenth century to indicate railway vehicles or street trams. With the appearance of automobiles near the turn of the century, the phrase motor car emerged, to be reduced eventually to car. Though flipping through the OED does not require input from sociolinguistics, Labov's methodology does give precision to the process which constructs historical dictionaries. The example here also gives some hint of the usefulness of Labov's study for pedagogy.

Surveys of word uses should take into account the ages of the speakers tested. Though most speakers will

ascribe terms within the invariant core without difficulty, some younger speakers will add or delete objects differently from older speakers, when new objects come into existence or old ones disappear. Some older speakers use the word gramaphone to indicate all sorts of phonographic equipment, a usage which sorely vexes some proud stereo owners. Among the papers presented at the first NWAVE conference, Henrietta Cedergren's (1973) can be useful for studies of age differences. That paper constructs a measure estimating rates of phonological rule diffusion among living speakers. That measure should be useful, mutatis mutandis, to studies of changes in word use among living speakers.

At the same time such a study could add precision to the project which created A New English Dictionary on Historical Principles, directing the lexicographer's attention to the age groups of writers under study. From accurate invariant core descriptions and lists of variable elements, plotted against age, it should become possible, as with living speakers, to discover precisely which elements are affecting shifts in meaning. That study should reflect usefully on shifts in values within the community since variable elements can be ranked hierarchically.

In actual instances of communication, of course, speakers share strategies for corrections of misunderstandings. In speaking, we can ask for clarification. Wherever vagueness of word use interferes with understanding, the listener simply asks for more information, leading the speaker to describe the object or point it out. In the

classroom, the teacher can footnote reading difficulties with information from the OED or sometimes with an anecdote. It is unclear whether written communication shares some clear-cut mechanism for corrections, but there seems intuitively to be some analogical correction methods embedded in reading. Kate Chopin is not, and cannot be, present for corrections of her use of the word car, yet I suspect that many readers can cope with her use of the word without recourse to the OED. In fact, the struggle for intelligibility is irrepressible in all forms of language communication, suggesting that modes of correction are available in reading. Studies in difficulties with denotations might lead to discoveries about such strategies of correction. It is at just this point, the intersection of word uses and strategies for understanding, that studies of communication in language begin to inform studies in rhetoric.

We must have correction strategies in communication because word meanings are inherently vague, the margin of overlap between your experience and mine expands and contracts with changes in time and circumstance. To insure the success of communication at just those places where word use becomes most fragile, speakers develop strategies of interaction designed to broaden the margin of overlap. Sociolinguistics wants to demonstrate the public interactive sources of language competence. Rhetoric moves from these strategies for communication to strategies for persuasion and identification. When we do not understand the use of a

word we can search for strategies in language for correction and elaboration. The repertoire of strategies available to our culture and time form the groundwork for rhetorical theory. The semantic component of language theory, built on Labov's model, directly informs Burke's notion of margin of overlap, which in turn, directly informs strategies of appeal. The immediate usefulness of all this for rhetorical theory should become clear in discussing the kinds of technical rhetorical terms John Kekes (1977) has called essentially contested concepts.

Terms like art, culture, democracy, the novel, and philosophy each identify for Kekes a single, real concept understood in common by scholars who argue over the proper use of each term. Through a series of tests, Kekes distinguishes between merely ambiguous or confused uses of words and arguments over these special terms. The tests need not detain us here, but the general idea of essentially contested concepts is useful, with some rhetorical revisions. There are communities of discourse which create and are created by discussions around concepts like art, culture, and the novel. Some of these terms are used to indicate both a class of objects and the abstract area of concentration under discussion. Labov's model for definitions of referring words can be useful in clarifying the focus of discourse in such communities. Where Kekes argues that members of these communities clearly understand one and only one concept, Labov's work suggests that members of these communities share an intuitive sense

of the range of the invariant core description of the objects under discussion, but the list of and relative rankings of variable elements may vary considerably within the community.

Constructing a definition of the novel with intuitive validity and empirical verifiability should be quite simple with Labov's model. Ask readers of novels to construct lists of books they consider to be novels within their own broadest sense of the term. Construct a master list of books toward which all readers will direct ascriptions of terms like novel, novella, romance, tale, or anatomy. The resulting judgments should construct consistency profiles leading to the kind of definition Labov has made for cup, an invariant core description with a list of significant variables ranked by impact on ascriptions. Scholars disputing the nature of the novel will have a precise ground on which to identify the territory of concern, to discover idiosyncratic uses of the term and changes in general use of the term through history. In all probability it will appear that some arguments over the nature of the novel are vacuous because scholars are not really dealing with precisely the same ranges of uses of the term. Some may put heavy weight on the length of the book while others may disregard that element altogether. It may be that differences in the invariant core may even emerge, signalling differences in basic conceptions of the novel among different generations of scholars.

The circularity of the process for constructing these definitions should not be disturbing. Since only human beings mean things by words and since human beings characteristically mean things by words, we can only ask human beings about how words are used and we can only learn about human beings in our questionings about uses of words. We learn to use the word cup in interaction with people speaking, with objects in the world, and with memories of other cups, people and uses of words. To construct definitions out of actual uses of words, we must study the process of interactions which informs those uses, an inherently circular process.

This argument does, however, present serious problems for the theoretical grounds of rhetoric. Some rhetoricians will argue that the nature of the novel is a philosophical issue, not an empirical, linguistic one, not resolvable through empirical surveys of words in use. A rhetorical view of Labov's work, on the other hand, suggests that the use of the technical term the novel is a construct out of the margin of overlap among many encounters with individual books, studies of those books, and interactions with the community of scholars. Technical terms, though the universe of discourse is highly limited, grow out of interactions in language, reflecting the same processes of growth and change as ordinary words. Empirical study can describe the use of the word with considerable accuracy not available in general discussion of concepts behind uses of these special terms.

It is likely that Labov, Burke, and Kekes will not be in complete agreement when the discussion turns to philosophical perspectives. Though Labov's sociolinguistics, Burke's Dramatism, and Kekes essentially contested concepts are all concerned with human interactions in language, the theoretical underpinnings of their approaches are far from identical. Some resolutions of perspectives is called for before these definitions are used in rhetorical theory, but such resolutions should be approached after the basic empirical work is done. Too often rhetoricians are content to argue over perspectives without data. Labov gives us a methodology for constructing useful definitions and we ought to construct them before we argue over them.

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